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Anti-CIA magazine wary of bill

Pending legislation would make exposing intelligence agents a crime

By Robert Parry

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WASHINGTON — A magazine that has been the center of a bitter controversy over its naming of covert CIA agents says it suspended the practice in its latest edition because of pending legislation to make those disclosures a criminal offense.

Supporters of that legislation, however, said Thursday that Congress should press ahead and enact the penalties so the magazine, Covert Action Information Bulletin, does not resume the exposure of CIA agents.

"We're glad that the legislative activity of Congress has led to a cessation of their practice of naming names," said Rob Simmons, staff director of the Senate Intelligence Committee, who helped draft one version of the legislation.

But Simmons noted that the magazine's editors had said they were suspending their "Naming Names" section only "contingent on a court test" of a congressional prohibition.

"This is an ugly business that these people are engaged in," Simmons said. "Congress should proceed in passing legislation so that they will suspend 'Naming Names' permanently."

Simmons also suggested that the magazine might have dropped the controversial section in its March issue simply "to weaken the momentum" for enacting the legislation.

The Senate is nearing final action on the bill, endorsed by President Reagan, to impose jail terms on journalists and other individuals who disclose the name of a U.S. intelligence agent. A similar bill passed the House overwhelmingly last fall.

However, critics of the legislation contend it could lead to the punishment of journalists who identify current or past agents in exposing intelligence abuses.

In a statement issued with the March issue, the editors of Covert Action Information Bulletin noted that "for the first time since its inception in July 1978, the magazine appears without its 'Naming Names' column."

"Because of the imminent passage of the Intelligence Identities Protection Act, C.A.I.B. has suspended publication of this column until the legislation, which we believe is unconstitutional in all of its proposed versions, can be tested in the courts."

The editors said the legislation appeared to be part of a drive by the Reagan administration to promote greater secrecy in government while

stepping up covert CIA activities:

"We all are facing a period of increasing dirty tricks by the government, at home and abroad, coupled with moves to make it much more difficult, even a crime, to discover what the government is up to," they said. "The Intelligence Identities Protection Act is just one facet of this dangerous trend."

The magazine first announced its intention to suspend the "Naming Names" column in its last issue published in October 1981. That issue contained a summary of agents identified in the past as well as a new list of names.

Simmons said some alleged agents that the magazine claimed were in Nicaragua had come under harassment since the October issue was published. He said one U.S. embassy official had been detained and interrogated for two hours by Sandinista officials after he was stopped for a traffic violation in February.

Morton Halperin of the American Civil Liberties Union said his group believes the pending legislation "is unconstitutional in all its forms." He added that it "sets a dangerous precedent" and could have "a chilling effect" in discouraging journalists from exercising their First Amendment rights.